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Skiing in your own private Idaho

Skiing by day and sleeping in a network of remote yurts by night is the ideal way to experience the wilds in this underrated state

Simon Akam

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Smoke escapes a yurt in Idaho.

We had the valley beneath Thompson Peak entirely to ourselves. A broad trench, snow-lined and walled with puckered granite, it dropped out of the heart of the Sawtooth range from a high col far above the timber line. Led by Brian – a bearded Vermonter who had brought his skis to Idaho for the winter – we swooped down through untracked snow, scrubbing off altitude until we left behind the sparkling summit landscape and reached the forest where we had spent the previous night. But no chalet or concrete dwelling lurked down there among the pine boles. For we had slept instead in a Mongolian-style yurt, roofed with a parachute, the night chill fended off with a roaring log stove.

Even for American skiers, Idaho is a somewhat unusual destination. Other attractions are better known; the powder of Utah, the glamour of Aspen in Colorado, and the spiky Tetons above Jackson Hole in Wyoming. By contrast rugged Idaho, which few people could pinpoint on a map, is renowned for its potatoes. But the mountainous Gem State – nicknamed for its mineral resources – also possesses a wealth of relatively unknown skiing possibilities.

The state's premier downhill resort is Sun Valley, near the old mining town of Ketchum, developed by the Union Pacific Railroad before the second world war. Ernest Hemingway finished *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in room 206 of the Sun Valley Lodge in the autumn of 1939, and today Bald Mountain, the main ski area, is combed over with immaculately groomed pistes, while the resort's clientele is gilded and urbane.



Mt Heyburn rises above the Sawtooth range.

Photograph: Simon Akam

Yet arguably the real ski appeal of Idaho lies further afield, in the region's vast tracts of untrammelled back country – the state is home to some of America's largest wilderness areas outside Alaska. Of course, there are no lifts in these immaculate high places, but equipped with touring equipment – a cross between downhill and Nordic gear that

permits skiers to both climb snow slopes and descend in the conventional alpine manner – adventurous powder hounds can find in Idaho's backcountry an experience totally removed from crowded resorts.

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